



NCOs of 162nd Infantry Brigade Ready to Tackle Regionally Aligned Forces Mission

By Pablo Villa

NCO Journal

Staff Sgt. Darius Magee knows the questions about what his unit does are out there.

Magee is one of a slew of instructors with the 162nd Infantry Brigade at Fort Polk, La., conducting a new type of advising mission. The unit — known since the Vietnam era as “Tigerland” — has for the past 11 years advised and prepared foreign civilian and military security forces in Afghanistan. It is now transitioning to a new role as part of the U.S. Army’s Regionally Aligned Forces, or RAF, mission.

The RAF mission is widely viewed as a recent effort, though it harkens back to the Army’s pre-9/11 role when it worked with other NATO countries to create strong security partnerships throughout the world. Nonetheless, RAF is often seen as an effort laden with suspense carried out while most Soldiers toil away at their daily jobs. It’s forced some of them to seek answers from fellow Soldiers who are closer to the process.

“When I talk to my Soldier buddies, they’re always saying, ‘Man, what are you doing at Fort Polk?’” Magee said. “I tell them, ‘You’ll hear about it soon.’”

The RAF vision

The Regionally Aligned Forces project was borne out of the 2010 U.S. National Security Strategy, which instructed the U.S. military to strengthen existing allied and partner relationships, as well as to pursue new partnerships. A key role of the defense strategic guidance was

regionally aligned, mission-tailored forces, which would be rebalanced to the Asia-Pacific region while maintaining a commitment to Middle East partners.

A regional alignment flags Army units of various sizes to prepare to support combatant commanders as they deal with mutual threats and interests with partner nations. The support is offered in the hope that any given nation’s defense forces can handle security issues without involving U.S. forces.

The opening stages of the RAF plan rolled out within the past two years, and the process for Army units to become regionally aligned is ongoing as it follows State Department direction to assign brigades to particular geographic combatant commands. Brigades aligned under the RAF concept begin their assignment by receiving a basic introduction to the culture and history of their region of alignment. That’s when the 162nd Infantry Brigade steps in.

The 162nd is already battle tested in providing instruction to foreign forces. The unit spent more than a decade training combat advisors and working with their security forces counterparts in Iraq and Afghanistan as those countries prepare to take over the job of protecting their own lands. As such, it was a natural fit for the 162nd to evolve into instructors of the new Regionally Aligned Forces-Training Team, or RAF-TT.

“Before Iraq and Afghanistan, there was stuff we did all the time,” said Magee, a RAF-TT instructor for U.S. European Command. “U.S. units always trained with foreign units. Now, we’re going back to that. Iraq is done.



Sgt. 1st Class Jaime Garza, a lead instructor for 162nd Infantry Brigade's Regionally Aligned Forces-Training Team, conducts convoy security training with Guatemalan soldiers. The 162nd prepares Army units set to deploy as part of their regional alignments for their time in the countries they are headed to. (Photo courtesy of 162nd Infantry Brigade Public Affairs)

Afghanistan is headed toward completion. We're going back to the stuff we used to do to have a presence in Europe and other places throughout the world."

Understanding where you're going

The biggest way the 162nd intends to meet its RAF goals is by helping the units it trains understand the prevailing culture and values of the countries it will be dealing with.

Under the current RAF structure, an Army brigade will be assigned to one of the Army's six geographic combatant commands — U.S. Northern Command (NORTHCOM), U.S. Southern Command (SOUTHCOM), U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM), U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and U.S. Africa Command (AFRICOM). But before the brigade is tasked with performing missions with partner nations, they will learn everything they need to know about the place they are going from the 162nd.

The Army hopes fostering that cultural awareness and language familiarization will strengthen relationships with partner nation security forces while furthering the business of training and mentoring these forces.

"The meat-and-potato concept is, 'teach a man to fish,'" said Sgt. 1st Class Andrew Baxter, one of four lead instructors for the 162nd Infantry Brigade's AFRICOM RAF-TT. "So you have our high-speed regular Army Soldiers going over and just helping their counterparts with their training and advancing their tactics. That way, if there are any issues in Africa, there's more of a coalition of African countries that can handle the situations in Africa versus American forces coming over and being in those conflicts."

AFRICOM is home to the Army's first RAF — the 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 1st Infantry Division, of Fort Riley, Kan. The "Dagger" Brigade received training from the 162nd throughout 2013 before deploying to nine

countries throughout Africa to conduct peace-support missions and furthering security goals.

The efforts undertaken as part of RAF missions are a far cry from the dangers experienced in Iraq and Afghanistan, RAF-TT instructors said.

"We've spent so many years dealing with Iraq and Afghanistan that a lot of these Soldiers need to learn to downshift, switch gears and focus on a completely different culture," said Sgt. 1st Class Mitchell Petry, an AFRICOM-TT instructor. "It's not about going into a country where you're carrying a weapon around and you have specific rules of engagement. It's going into a country where, in most cases, you do not have a weapon and you're relying on your ability to interact with that host-nation military, to build that rapport and to not show them how to do things but, more often, exchange ideas with them.

"A lot of these Soldiers — especially today dealing with the Iraqi military or Afghanistan military, where we're so used to building them up from nothing — they have to get in the mindset that these militaries they're going to work and exchange ideas with and train with are very proud of their service, are very proud of their military and, in most cases, are very well trained, highly disciplined militaries. So it's a completely different environment than most of them are probably used to."

The challenges

With the new scope in missions come new challenges.

The curriculums that the 162nd's RAF-TT instructors develop to teach deploying units are largely based on their research of a given country.

"It's a lot of reading," Magee said. "It's a lot of phone calls. It's a lot of researching just to come up with a strong class to pitch."

Instructors have some help from personnel at the Military Intelligence Center of Excellence of Fort Huachuca, Ariz., as well as the NATO School Oberammergau in Germany. But developing a class and its delivery is largely up to instructors. Magee said leaving that in the hands of NCOs is highly beneficial.

"We already know what other NCOs want to hear," Magee said. "We don't want to go in there teaching stuff they don't care about. So as an NCO, I know what to look for when teaching these classes. I ask myself, 'What would I want to hear if I were going to this country?'"

Another challenge when developing a curriculum is a familiar one — the language barrier.

The 162nd tries to mitigate that by playing to its Soldiers' strengths.

For Sgt. 1st Class Jaime Garza, a CENTCOM RAF-TT lead instructor, his strong command of the Spanish language makes him a good fit for missions in Central and South America.

"One of the challenges is always the language barrier," Garza said. "It poses a big challenge for Soldiers like

me who speak English and Spanish. I have to be able to translate our Soldiers' training to our counterparts. Then I have to be able to translate anything they say back to our guys. It can create a long back-and-forth."

Garza did just that when training the Georgia Army National Guard for its state partnership missions in Guatemala. However, he said U.S. Soldiers get plenty in return when working with partner nations.

"We are not going down there to show them *the* way to do things. We are there to show them *our* way of doing things," Garza said. "But our way is not the only way. We are just sharing with them the way we do it. A lot of times, they have their way of doing things already. So we'll get them to show us how they conduct certain things and we'll say, 'OK, look that's good.' But we'll take our lessons learned coming out of Iraq and Afghanistan and we'll share those with them. It's really about working hand-in-hand with them.

"We stress the fact that we're guests in their country, and we also pick up some things. It's not just us feeding to everybody. Building partner capacities happens on both sides to benefit them and benefit us."

Moving forward

The Army expects to continue its push toward training more RAF units during the next few years. Meanwhile, the RAF-TTs of the 162nd Infantry Brigade will continue pounding the books and preparing curriculums for classes with the tenacity of the tiger that has come to represent the unit.

"This is a very important job," said Sgt. 1st Class Daniel Falk, a PACOM RAF-TT advisor. "What we do on the surface is nothing but train, advise and work with foreign forces. But in my words, we can't be in a war or a deployment for a great amount of time. We have to hand over the reins at some point and let these other countries work their problems out. And that's what a RAF and our mission here at 162nd is. It's to help them transition over and get them to work their chain of responsibility and make their command stronger.



Sgt. 1st Class Jaime Garza said his ability to speak Spanish is a boon in the preparation of curriculum for the classes he teaches for other Army units preparing to deploy to Central and South American countries as part of the Army's Regionally Aligned Forces mission. (Photo courtesy of 162nd Infantry Brigade Public Affairs)

"Our motto is '*Omne Vir Tigris* — Every Man A Tiger.' We always attack our job with the utmost importance, and we take it very seriously. We make sure it's to standard and complete so that everybody gets the best training available here. Back in Tigerland during the Vietnam War, all these buildings weren't here. Traditions stay; they just get re-applied a little bit."

And while RAF training continues moving forward largely in the background, Magee says it doesn't affect the way he and the rest of the instructors conduct their work.

"Someone is always in the background," Magee said. "I think 162nd is in the background right now, doing the big work that no one sees. When it comes to these RAF-TTs, whenever the Army moves that way, it's gonna start at the 162nd because we've been doing it. It's gonna be new to everyone else. But it's gonna be something we've already been working on the last couple years. Even if I move to another assignment — and chances are I will move to a RAF unit — I will be there to help my leadership understand how important the RAF mission is." ■

NCO JOURNAL

<https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/NCO-Journal/>

<https://www.facebook.com/NCOJournal>

<https://twitter.com/NCOJournal>

Disclaimer: The views expressed in this article are those of the authors and do not necessarily reflect the opinions of the NCO Journal, the U.S. Army, or the Department of Defense.

